

# Voting Rights in Peril

By John Conyers Jr.

**A**T the heart of the debate over reforming the nation's electoral system lies the question of whether standards for voting should be set by the federal government or left up to state and local election officials. It is hardly a surprise that the Election Reform Information Project

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## The national role in ensuring fair elections.

found, in a survey released last week, that state and local officials would prefer to continue exercising exclusive authority over federal elections. But it is disappointing nonetheless. The national voting rights standards that I have pushed for in the House and that Senator Christopher Dodd has pressed in the Senate provide fundamental safeguards that should have been guaranteed long ago.

The House has unwisely passed a bill that grants states nearly unfettered discretion in the administration of elections. The Senate is set to take a more aggressive approach. The real question for the committee that will reconcile the differences is not what state and local officials prefer, but what will guarantee that the problems with our elections will be fixed.

At a minimum, the states should be required to provide accessible and well-functioning machines for citizens who speak languages other than English and for those with disabilities.

*John Conyers Jr. of Michigan is ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee.*

Voters who have been wrongly purged from registration records should be allowed to cast provisional ballots.

America has tried leaving election decisions to each state. We have no minimum federal voting rights standards for voting machines. The result: In the 2000 presidential election, 1.5 million ballots were discarded due to defective voting equipment. We have no minimum federal standards guaranteeing the right of a voter with a disability to cast a private and independent vote. The result: In 2000, 47 percent of voters with disabilities encountered physical barriers or had trouble getting to the polling place.

State and local officials say they will eventually make necessary changes on their own. History teaches us, however, that states have been slow in outlawing discrimination. In 1868, the 14th Amendment was adopted, guaranteeing black citizens the rights and privileges of citizenship. In the name of states' rights, implementation was left to local control. This model failed, and federal legislation became necessary: Without the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination in public establishments and in hiring might still be legal in some parts of the country. Without the Voting Rights Act of 1965, poll taxes might still be prevalent.

A sad reality is that almost four decades since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the disenfranchised are overwhelmingly people of color. In Florida in 2000, African-American voters were nearly 10 times as likely as whites to have their ballots discarded. Voters in low-income, high-minority districts were more than three times as likely to have their votes for president discarded as voters in high-income, low-minority districts.

The lesson in Florida was that notwithstanding the great work of many states and localities, one rogue state can disrupt a federal election and disenfranchise thousands. Election reform is necessary to preserve our system of democracy, and it is the foremost civil rights issue of our day. □